

The Chronicles of Addington Peace

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The Tragedy of Thomas Hearne

SYNOPSIS:—Inspector Peace, in reflecting on the good in bad men told of being called to a hospital to visit a dying man—Jack Henderson, a gentleman born and bred, who had gone wrong. Henderson desired to tell Peace the truth concerning the murder of Julius Craig. Henderson was broke in London. At a saloon he was approached by a big jovial man who wished to speak with him privately. He went out in the big man's carriage. An offer of 500 sovereigns was made to him for his aid in gaining freedom of Julius Craig—a convict at Princetown prison at Dartmoor—half down and half when the job was done. Henderson went to Dartmoor under the guise of an American student—Mr. Abel Kingsley. He was to signal Craig by wearing a white waterproof and Craig was to dash for freedom on the first foggy day. In the midst of Henderson's preparations for Craig's release he made the acquaintance of a peculiar old man, Thomas Hearne at the inn. Henderson felt certain that Hearne was in the neighborhood on some peculiar mission but could not find out what it was. One night he saw Hearne slipping away from the inn in the moonlight and instantly determined to follow him.

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WHEN I got to the back of the inn Hearne was a good four hundred yards away, climbing a low ridge. As he disappeared over its edge I set off running at top speed, for I saw that in so broken and rugged a place I should have to keep close to his heels or I should lose him altogether. It was well I did so, for when I reached the crest of the rise he had vanished. Presently, however, I caught sight of him again, walking very fast down a hollow at right angles to the line he first took. It led in the direction of the cairn hill.

It was hard work, that two miles' stalk across the moor. Sometimes I ran, sometimes crawled, sometimes lay flat on my chest with my head buried in the heather like an ostrich. Once I tried to cut a corner across what seemed a plot of level turf and struggled back, panting, from the grasp of the bog with the black slime almost to my waist. But I took great credit for my performance since the old man tramped steadily forward, showing no sign of having seen me.

He did not climb the cairn hill as I had half expected, but skirted along the base until he came to the track which led to the ruined farm. Down this he walked quickly and passed through the doorway of the main building. I remained upon the slope of the hill, waiting for him to reappear. Five, ten minutes went by, and then my curiosity got the better of my prudence. I determined to go down and see what he was about.

The place was sheltered from the gale, but I could hear it yelping and humming in the rocks above, now and again a gust came curling up the valley, setting the heather whispering around me. I crept forward over the soft turf of the cart track, reached the gap where the door had been, hesitated, listened, and then stuck in my head.

I had been a boxer in my time, or that would have been the end of me. As I ducked, the heavy stick flicked off my cap and crashed into the wall with a nasty thud. I jumped back, and he came storming out through the doorway like a madman. I never saw more beastly fury in a man's eyes. I side-stepped, and he missed me again—it was a knife this time. Then I woke up and let him have it with my right under the ear. He staggered, dropping the knife. As he stopped to pick it up, I jumped for him and in ten seconds more was sitting

on his chest, pegging out his arms on the turf. He tried a struggle or two, but he soon saw that I was far the stronger man, and so lay panting, with a hopeless despair in his face, that, in a man of his age was shocking to witness. He had tried to kill me, but, on my honor, I felt sorry for him.

"Well, Mr. Hearne," I said, "and what does this mean?"
"Too old," he gasped. "Twenty years ago—different. How did you suspect? It was justice—nothing but bare justice, by Heaven!"

"Now, what in the world do you think I am?" I asked him, in great surprise.

"A detective. You couldn't deceive me."

I got to my feet with a curse at the muddle I had made of it, and he sat up staring at me as if he thought I had gone clean crazy of a sudden. "I'm no detective," I said angrily,

"though I was fool enough to believe you were one."

"Then why did you follow me to-night?" he asked, with a quick suspicion.

"Why did you try to kill me?" I said. "The truth is, Mr. Hearne, you and I are playing a risky game. Is it to be cards on the table, or are we to separate and say no more about it?"

He sat watching me for a time with a puzzled look. Plainly he was in great uncertainty of mind.

"Perhaps I have nothing to tell," he said at last.

"A man does not attempt to murder detectives unless he has a crime to conceal."

"That is true," he said, nodding his head; "very just and true."

There was nothing to be gained by a long bargaining of secrets with him. Whatever his business, he could speedily discover mine if he chose.

"Yes. Do you know him?"

He burst into a scream of hysterical laughter, swaying his body to and fro, and pressing his hands to his sides as if trying to crush the uncanny merriment out of him; and then, before I guessed what he was about, the old fellow was upon me, with his arms about my neck in mad embrace.

"Welcome, comrade," he cried. "I, too, have come to find a way out of Princetown jail for Julius Craig."

It took a good five minutes and a pull out of a flask to get him back to hard sense. Then he told me his story sitting on a fallen stone under the old cherry tree.

Craig was dearer to him than any brother, he said, with a burst of open sincerity. There was that between them that he could never forget while life remained to him. He had heard how the man had come under prison discipline, and had come to help him escape if that were humanly possible. Of me or my London employers he knew nothing whatever.

He had been shown over the prison, having obtained a pass from an influential friend, and while there had learned the place where Craig was daily employed. Yesterday from the cairn hill he had satisfied himself that the convict was working in the gang.

He had crept out this evening to examine the stream and hedge which divided the new enclosure from the moor. When he saw me on his track, his suspicions as to my business were confirmed. Either he must give up his project or my mouth must be stopped. So he tempted me into the ruined farm. The rest I knew.

He spoke in an easy, pleasant voice, with a perfect frankness and good humor. It never seemed to occur to him that he had done anything unreasonable, anything to which a level-headed man could object. I stared at him in growing amazement.

There seemed, indeed, only one solution before me—that he had become partially insane.

"You must understand my position Mr. Kingsley," he concluded. "I am not a lunatic, but I have made up my mind in this matter of Julius Craig. Any one who is foolish enough to come between us must stand aside or take the consequences. Towards yourself, for example I had no ill will. In fact, I rather liked you. But you must admit that, as a detective, your presence was excessively inconvenient. Now that I know the truth, I welcome you as a most valuable ally. I am prepared to trust you absolutely. Come, what are your plans?"

I told him as we walked back to the inn. He expressed himself an admirer of their simplicity as we parted for the night. Mad or not, I had found an assistant who would be of great help to me. So I let it stay at that and slept like a rock till nine next morning.

Matters moved quickly with us. I hired a stout horse and a two-wheeled cart for a month from the landlord to whom I talked neolithic man of an evening, impressing him with a learning, acquired from the reports of that worthy society, the Devonshire asso-

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"Be careful with that gun," I said.

If I were honest with him he might return the confidence.

"I am arranging for the escape of Julius Craig, now doing his time in the prison yonder," I told him.

"Julius Craig!" he echoed, with wild eyes. "The escape of Julius Craig?"